A RESEARCH ON THE IDENTITY AND THE CULTURAL FEATURES OF POMAK COMMUNITY

*Aslı Yayak**

Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the identity and cultural characteristics of the Pomak community. In the Balkan peninsula, which was one of the most nonuniform areas of the world in terms of language, religion, race and culture, the Balkan War (1912-1913) broke out and World War I broke out in 1914. Among the minorities that lived in the Balkans, the people who suffered the most from persecution, oppression, assimilation and genocide have been Pomak Turks. During the conquest of Bulgaria by the Ottoman Empire, Kipchak (Kuman) Turks living in Bulgaria since the 11th century helped the Ottoman conquest of Bulgaria by accepting Islam in the 14th century. For this reason, they received the name "pomaga" which means helper and took their place on the pages of history as Pomak Turks. It is a historical fact that the Pomak Turks came from the descendants of the Kipchaks who came to the Balkans in the 11th century. The Kipchaks adopted Islam since it resembled the old Turkish belief and united with the Ottomans. The Pomak Turks lived in the 19th century between the Rhodope and the Eastern Macedonian under Ottoman rule. The advent of Pomak Turks to Turkey has intensified after the Russo-Turkish War in 1878 and with the immigration in the following years. Pomaks who migrated to Turkey mostly settled in Balikesir, Bursa, Canakkale, Edirne, İstanbul, İzmir, Kırklareli, Kocaeli, Kütahya, Samsun, Tekirdag and Muğla.

Introduction

The Balkan peninsula is located in the southeast of the European continent and takes its name from the Turkish-origin word "Balkan", meaning "steep mountain covered by forest" or "mountain range" (Özcan, 2013). The Balkan peninsula has a difficult geography due to its steep mountains. These geographical features have made interregional interaction difficult and no one nation has ever dominated there. These conditions also led to the development of a wide variety of languages, cultures and traditions in this peninsula. All the empires that had tried to dominate there were fragmented and many different states were established instead of them. This effect of that geography is still seen today. Indeed, as a result of developments occurring after the 1990s, today in the Balkan peninsula many states like Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey (Thrace part), Greece, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo continue their assets. The Balkan peninsula still has no permanent order. This kind of a disorder is due to the socio-cultural characteristics of the societies living on the Balkan peninsula, their demographic structures, geostrategic and geopolitical structures of the countries (Özcan, 2013). In the Balkan peninsula, which was one

of the most nonuniform areas of the world in terms of language, religion, race and culture, the Balkan War (1912-1913) broke out and World War I broke out in 1914. Regional states and major states have carried out bloody civil wars for their interests in this region, and they oppressed the minorities by carrying out genocides. The policies being implemented against minorities in some Balkan states still cause tensions even today. Among the minorities that lived in the Balkans, the people who suffered the most from persecution, oppression, assimilation and genocide have been Pomak Turks (Alp, 2008). The aim of this study is to investigate the identity and cultural characteristics of the Pomak community.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF POMAK TURKS

During the conquest of Bulgaria by the Ottoman Empire, Kipchak (Kuman) Turks living in Bulgaria since the 11th century helped the Ottoman conquest of Bulgaria by accepting Islam in the 14th century. For this reason, they received the name "pomaga" which means helper and took their place on the pages of history as Pomak Turks (Yinanç, 2002).

It is a historical fact that the Pomak Turks came from the descendants of the Kipchaks who came to the Balkans in the 11th century. The Kipchaks adopted Islam since it resembled the old Turkish belief and united with the Ottomans. Unfortunately, since the scientific studies and researches explaining the history, origin and culture of our citizens in our country are not sufficient, the Western countries have used this situation in order to protect the interests of the Balkan countries in the 19th century. It was claimed by the Greeks that the Pomak Turks were "Islamized Greeks". As to Bulgarians, they alleged that our cognates were "Muslimized Bulgarians" by pleading dialect differences. The Macedonians also defended that the Pomak Turks were "Muslimized Macedonians (Alp, 2008; Koyuncu, 2013).

The Pomak Turks lived in the 19th century between the Rhodope and the Eastern Macedonian under Ottoman rule. With the Treaty of Bucharest signed in 1913 as a result of the Balkan Wars, the places they lived in remained within the political borders of Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia. At present, they live in the states of Thrace, Macedonia, Rhodopes and Albania. According to the statement made by Bulgarian Ministry of Interior in 1989, there are 270.00 Pomak Turks living in the country. The Bulgarian authorities announced in the 2000s that there are 500,000 Pomak Turks in the Balkans. According to this statement, around 80-120 thousand of Pomak Turks live in Albania, 40 thousand live in Greece, 40 thousand live in Macedonia and 150-200 live in in Bulgaria (Alp, 2008; Koyuncu, 2013). In Turkey, a clear number could not be determined because of the political point of view of the state, Pomaks are evaluated under the Turkish identity and also it's not used an additional ethnic category for them (http://pomaknews.com/pomashkiselo/?p=1).

However, it is estimated that around 300 thousand Pomaks are still talking and understanding Pomak language in our country and there is more than a few million Pomaks (https://www.demokrathaber.org/yasam/pomaklar-bulgaristanda-bulgar-turkiyede-turk-h16467.html) .

The advent of Pomak Turks to Turkey has intensified after the Russo-Turkish War in 1878 and with the immigration in the following years. Pomaks who migrated to Turkey mostly settled in Balıkesir, Bursa, Çanakkale, Edirne, İstanbul, İzmir, Kırklareli, Kocaeli, Kütahya, Samsun, Tekirdağ and Muğla (Özcan, 2013).

IDENTITY PERCEPTION OF POMAKS

The Pomaks are the grandchildrens of the tribe who went firstly to Ukrain, then to the Balkans by following the northern migration path of Central Asia, which was written as Kipchak in the Turkish resources and named as the Kumans by the Europans. It is stated in the Russian sources from the years 1055-1056 that the Kipchaks are of the same lineage as Turkmen, Pechenek and Oghuzs. Both the oldest eastern and western sources mentioned that this tribe is blond, light-skinned, handsome and curvy. It is thought that Kuman name was formed by the root "Ku" meaning "yellowish" and the paragoge "men" as in the name of Türkmen (Alp, 2008; Koyuncu, 2013).

As to the term "Pomak", it's the name given to those who speak Pomak-Turkish language in Balkan peninsula and who claimed that they are Muslim Turks. In the Ottoman sources, neither "Muslim Bulgarians" nor "Pomaks" are mentioned. The term Pomak was encountered after the Russo-Turkish War (1839-40). Kanitz tried to explain the name Pomak in 1882 for the first time and alleged that the Pomak term came from the word "Pomagaçi" meaning helpers in Slavic which was derived from the verb "Pomaçi". He thought that they took this name since they are on the duty as helpers in the Turkish army (Alp, 2008; Koyuncu, 2013).

Alp (2012) stated in his book about the history of Pomaks that after the Ottoman-Russian War (1877-78), other states started to take action in order to eliminate the Turkish culture and self in every period the Turks got weak. For this purpose, they applied genocides to the Turks, put leverage on them and subjected them to forced migration. Especially the Bulgarians have acted on the principle of forming a single "Christian Communist Bulgarian Slavic" society in Bulgaria by being back by the Tsarist Russia, the European States, the Church and then the Soviet Union. For this cause its goal had been to reduce Turkish population and eliminate Turkish National Consciousness. During the '93 war, approximately 350 thousand Muslim Turks were killed and hundreds of thousands were subjected to forced displacement in Bulgaria. In the Balkan wars, 300 thousand Turks were killed and 440 thousand Turks were migrated. 8-10 thousand Pomak Turks who did not want to become Bulgarian were massacred in Rodos Disasters (1968-72). After 1984, many Pomaks were slaughtered, arrested and sent to concentration camps. After 1989, the Bulgarians seized the assets of the Turks in violation of human rights and forced 345 thousand Turkish immigrants. In this way, the Turkish presence within the borders of Bulgaria was tried to be destroyed. When demographic data of the 1980s is checked, it's seen that while Turkey's population growth rate is 20%, it's 5% for Bulgaria and these data are an indicator of Bulgaria's genocide against the Turks, the pressure of Bulgarisation and forced migration.

The extremist and aggressive spread of nationalism in the Balkans has also caused the ethnic minorities in the Balkans to face some labeling. The Bulgarians saw language as the only element for the defense of ethnic identity. However, when it was seen that the language did not explain the ethnic identity alone, it was claimed that the Pomaks living in Bulgaria were Turkified Bulgarians (Shishkov, 1995). Today, Pomaks, which are spread over different Balkan countries, feel themselves belonging to ethnicity of Turkish or ethnicity of their countries (Bulgaria, Greece, Macedonia, etc.). The Pomak community want to preserve their

Muslim identity by not accepting to see themselves as ethnically Bulgarians (Eminov, 1997). Muslim Pomak Turks do not agree with Bulgarians or other Slavic societies in terms of ethnic origin. Since the Pomaks were the Kuman-Kipchak Turks who settled in Balkans pre-Ottoman, Bulgarisation or Islamization of Bulgarians cannot be discussed (The Culture and Solidarity Association of Rodop-Tuna Turks, 1976).

The religion factor takes precedence for the Pomaks in the perception of ethnic identity. Pomaks describe themselves as Turks (Bahar, 2002). In their view, the words Pomak and Muslim are equal concepts and accept Islam as a nationality. Although some Pomaks have defined themselves as Bulgarians, Macedonians or Greeks because of political pressures, after 1990, 70% of the Pomaks have taken back their Muslim names within the scope of name rights. Only 13% of them preferred to continue using their Bulgarian names (Turan, 2005).

The cultural identity of the Pomaks is not different from the Turks in terms of their appearance and lifestyle. As stated by Bahar (2002), the Pomaks migrated to the Turkish culture without being assimilated and with their own national identity (Pomak identity). With their choice of Islam, they were actually involved in a civilization and system.

As well as the Pomaks perceive themselves as Muslim Turks, the fact that they see themselves apart not just from Christian Balkan identities but the Bosniacs and Albanians which are also Muslims, clearly demonstrates that they do not establish an ethnic affiliation with them (Taşdelen, 2008).

The notion of identity and the feeling of belonging are the important features that make up a community and distinguish it from other communities. No society and individual can survive without differentiating their ethnic identity. Both the Pomaks in Bulgaria and Greece, from the Ottoman Empire up to the present day, have suffered politically and socially and have not felt free to define themselves. The Pomaks, who lived in different countries of the Balkans and tried to connect with different nations, never felt themselves connected to Bulgarian, Greek, Macedonian or Serbs. Throughout history, the Pomaks have always said that they are Turkish as well as they are Muslims despite great oppression and atrocities. By seeing Turkey as their motherland, they have taken refuge in Turkey (Özcan, 2013).

POMAK LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

In the dialect of Pomak Turks, there are influences of Ukrainian, Bulgarian and Macedonian Slavic at the rate of 30%. This is due to their contact with these tribes for centuries. It has 25% of Kumanca-Kipchak, 20% of Oguz Turkish and 15% of Nogayca which is a Turkish dialect. Also Arabic has a 10% effect on the Pomak dialect. This effect is due to their adoption of Islam. The Turkish dialect of Pomak is divided into 3 parts: the Turkish dialect of Rodop-Pomak, the Turkish dialect of Katarist Pomak, and the Turkish dialect of the Danube Basin (Alp, 2008).

Even if the Slavic influence in Pomak Turkish dialect is due to the exploitation of the foreign nations which are concerned with the race and culture characteristics of Pomaks, the fact that the including of more Turkish elements of the dialect invalidates the claims (Alp, 2008).

Since ancient times, the cultural activities of the ancestors of Pomak have been directed towards two purposes. The first is the ceremonies in which they express their gratitude for goodness and beauty. The second is the activities against the times which there are disease,

drought, inefficiency, evil and infertility, and the activities they use magic for protection from evil. Because of these activities, other Balkan folks called the Pomaks as “the people seeking immortality in the Balkans”. The people of Pomak transferred the rituals they invented to withstand the natural events full of dangers to the next generations by means of traditions. Bocuk nights and Sedenkas celebrated by the Pomaks has reached up to today.

Bocuk nights is a ritual where entertainment factor is at the forefront. Festivity, magic and abundance are together in this cultural ritual. Bocuk night is a sign of the beginning of the severest winter nights. If the waters freeze in these winter nights, it is believed that the year will pass in abundance and wealth. There is a belief of “the wife of Bocuk”, it’s believed that she wanders in the image of an old woman in white sheets.

There are seasonal differences between the first settlements of the Pomaks in the Balkans and the geography they currently live in. Therefore, in the early days, even if the Pomaks strive to celebrate their Bocuk nights by coinciding with the same dates (60 days after the beginning of November), afterwards these celebrations began to coincide after 20 days from the beginning of the year. Many similar cultural events are still being used in cultural celebrations in different periods.

The second of the Pomak rituals is “Sedenka”. Sedenka is a Slavic word and it’s derived from the verb root “Sedeti” (to sit). It’s an entertainment peculiar to village women. The practice of Sedenka has decreased nowadays, it mostly continues in villages. There are three types of Sedenka varying with small differences. The first is a night created by gathering the neighbors together. This night's food is corn and pumpkin, however, the bulgur is prepared, the tomtom is played so that the girls can dance and everybody chats with each other. In the second one, if a promise is obtained from the family of the girl regarding that the girl is given in a marriage, people gather together for promise ceremony and a handkerchief taken by the girl is brought to the groom and the girls have fun together that night. As to the third type of Sedenka, it’s an activity of helping each other carried out in harvest season. In this activity, corn is peeled and sunflower is beaten. After the harvest, an entertainment is organized. Sedenka is the place where the girls and boys of the village meet each other. In general terms, the purpose of this ritual is to help each other, to make leisure time fun, to strengthen neighborly relations, to socialize, etc.

Pomak Turks wash their newborn babies with salt water. If the financial situation of the family is good, the birth of the baby is celebrated by slaughtering a small cattle and hosting for dinner. In this invitation, the guests are given a gift, the tip is distributed. This baby celebrations are called "babına" by Pomaks in Macedonia (Torbesh) and "simidal" by the Pomaks who migrated from Plovdiv city of Bulgaria to Turkey. When the fortieth day of baby has come, an islamic memorial service is given and after that, the dinner is given. An amulet is worn to the baby to protect him/her from the evil eye. The oldest woman in the household puts the baby in its cradle to sleep. Puerperant has the belief of protecting people from the evil spirits or imaginary beings called “al karısı”, “karabasan” and “albasma” colloquially. Therefore, those women put a red belt on their waist. During an average period of forty days of childbirth, women are not left alone and they are well cared for. For Pomak Turks, it is also important that their children cut their first tooth and talk for the first time. To celebrate the cutting of the first tooth, “diş toyu” is made; also some presents are given to acquaintances for

the celebration of their talk for the first time. Also the first cut hair and nails of children are hidden and the nails are buried in the ground (Özcan, 2013).

Family structures of Pomak Turks are based on the male dominance. Consanguineous marriages are not welcomed. At the weddings the henna is applied to the bride. If there is a funeral in a household, no food is coocked there, the food is brought by the neighbours. On the seventh day of death in the funeral home, halva is distributed. In addition, a chair is placed in front of the door of the funeral home and the towel is thrown on the chair (Özcan, 2013).

In the culture of Pomaks who mostly dwell in mountainous terrains and high places, there is generally animal husbandry. This lifstyle is also reflected to their culinary culture. The food of animal origin like meat, milk, cheese, butter are predominant in the cuisine of the Pomaks (Özcan, 2013)

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